Apart from the interest attaching to a notable experiment in municipal handling of the problem of poverty, there is a special reason for including in this series of pamphlets on Bristol history some account of the Corporation of the Poor, the body which was established in 1696 to take charge of the administration of poor relief throughout the city, virtually forming a union of its 18 parishes for this purpose. The official records of the Court and committees of this Corporation were kept in St. Peter's Hospital and were destroyed with it in the air raid of 24 November 1940. Nearly all that remains of these primary sources is therefore the volume of extracts published by the Bristol Record Society in 1931.

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1a. In this pamphlet the term ‘Corporation’ applies always, as in their own usage, to the Corporation of the Poor.
with the problem of poverty. The Elizabethan law on the subject was embodied in the famous Act of 1601, but because this laid the responsibility for its administration so largely on local J.Ps., Mayors and parish officers, much depended upon their action, especially when after 1640 the King’s Council relaxed its vigilant supervision. Big cities were not usually so slow to provide for their poor as places where the problem was less concentrated, and Bristol in particular had a name for the ‘magnificent tradition of civic responsibility’ shown by its wealthy citizens in many private benefactions.  

2 Nevertheless, here as elsewhere, by the later seventeenth century the Poor Law was proving inadequate.

One obstacle which the Poor Law had heightened rather than removed was the obsession of parish authorities with settlement rights: they were more anxious to keep down rates than to give relief to the needy. Every applicant’s claim was examined for proof of his legal settlement; if he could be disowned, he was passed back to the parish where he was alleged to belong. Litigation over these unfortunate shuttlecocks took an inordinate amount of time, money and ingenuity. The evil effects of the practice were very obvious in a city where the heaviest burden of poor relief fell on the growing industrial parishes—Temple, St. James, St. Philip and St. Jacob—which were less able to bear it than their richer mercantile neighbours in the central parishes. Several times during the 1690’s the magistrates had ordered one or more of these to help a necessitous parish, either in a particular case or by a general contribution for its poor.  

There are indications in the late seventeenth century that Bristol had suffered particularly from low wages and unemployment in the cloth trade for several decades and that recovery was difficult, perhaps because of the rigidity of gild regulations.  

4 The city was thus in a position where it was seen to be not only possible but urgently desirable to tackle both unemployment and settlement problems simultaneously. The primary aim of its 1696 Act, ‘erecting of Hospitals and Workhouses’, would obviously need the pooled resources of several parishes and hence their union


3. Bristol Quarter Sessions Records, e.g. 27 May 1691 and 21 April 1696.

in the enterprise. Such an effort to meet the situation was not an
original idea. Would-be social and economic reformers had already
been thinking along these lines, and London had gone so far as
to establish a Corporation of the Poor under the Commonwealth,
consisting of 52 citizens chosen by the Common Council to act
with the Lord Mayor and Aldermen in the matter. So many
Bristol merchants had commercial contacts with the capital that
it is very unlikely they did not know of this. The Bristol scheme,
however, avowedly owed most to John Cary, a son of the vicar
of St. Philip and St. Jacob. He was a West India merchant
influential in both cities when he published his Essay on Trade,
which set forth his view that the only cure for the increasing
number of beggars, who ‘take more pains than an honest man
doth at his Trade’, was a law to ‘provide work for those who are
willing, and force them to work that are able’.

The Act of 1696 laid upon the Bristol Corporation of the Poor
a much more comprehensive function than this; it was required
‘to have the care of, and provide for the Maintenance of all the
Poor of the said City . . . except such as shall be otherwise suffi-
ciently provided for by the charitable Gifts of other Persons’. By
this date, ‘maintenance of all the poor’ had been for a century
a recognised public duty; when the Corporation established a
workhouse, therefore, it was not a supplementary voluntary exer-
cise, like the almost-contemporary Quaker experiment in Bristol.

In its constitution as well as in its activities the new Corpora-
tion was grafted on to the existing system. The governing Court
consisted of the Mayor and Alderman ex officio, as well as 48
Guardians ‘to be chosen out of the honestest and discreetest in-
habitants of the said City’ by all inhabitants paying 1d. or more
per week to the Poor’s Rate. The city ward, not the parish, was
the unit of election for these Guardians, but the parish was still
used until 1823 as the basis in assessing and collecting rates,
and until 1828 in the payment of out-relief to permanent cases.
The Mayor, upon receiving each year from the Corporation a
certificate of the sum it needed for the year, had then to allot
to each parish its share and issue warrants to the parish officers
for its collection; these officers would break down their parish
quota into individual assessments and collect them. Without the

5. E.g. Sir Josiah Child, A new Discourse of Trade, 1668; Thomas Firmin’s
account of his ‘workhouse’ pubd. 1678. Both ran through later editions.
thesis, University of Nottingham.
co-operation, therefore, of the Mayor and the churchwardens the Corporation could not function, for it could raise no money. In its very first year it ran up against this obstacle: John Hine, Mayor in 1696-7, could not be induced by any pressure to issue the necessary writ for the collection of the rate. He ‘resolved to obstruct us all he could’, says Cary, but ‘We laboured to keep up the Spirits of our Friends’, and the Guardians themselves advanced the weekly relief money during Hine’s mayoral year, so that the poor might not suffer. In 1697 there was trouble, too, with churchwardens and overseers who did not or would not bring in their rates. Hence, at a cost of £7-9s.-4d., the Corporation got two clauses added to the Tiverton Workhouse Act of 1697, which empowered them to issue warrants for levy rates, if magistrates refused to do so within twenty days after being certified of the necessary amount; and churchwardens who did not bring in their parish quota within 20 days of the Corporation’s demand would incur distaint of their goods. The need for these clauses is shown by the fact that in 1699 the second had to be applied in all 18 parishes. Johnson, a Guardian of twelve years’ experience writing much later, suggests that this recalcitrance may have been due to jealousy; it certainly ceased to be acute after an Act of 1714 had added the churchwardens to the Court of Guardians.

In 1696 the hopes of the new Corporation evidently centred on establishing a workhouse, with the emphasis on the first syllable. Earlier experiments in this direction in Bristol (1653 and 1679) had apparently faded out so quickly that the Guardians could be under no illusion as to the difficulties involved, but they were even more convinced of the necessity of setting the able-bodied to work and teaching poor children a trade. They had no doubt that unemployment was a moral as well as a social and economic menace. The original plan of Cary and his colleagues was for two workhouses, one for girls and one for boys. A building adjoining Bridewell, lent by the City Council, was soon in use for 100 girls. Then the Corporation bought for £800 the premises

9. Often referred to in Bristol as ‘the Tiverton clauses’. Tiverton was one of several towns which procured Acts similar to Bristol’s in the years 1696-8. Others were Hereford, Exeter, Colchester, Kingston-upon-Hull.
10. James Johnson, Transactions of the Corporation of the Poor during 126 years (Bristol 1826), p. 8.
10a. 12 Anne, sess. 2, cap. 15.
Part of St. Peter's Hospital, Bristol, the home of the Bristol Corporation of the Poor. It was a four-gabled house of which two gables are shown here.
known as the Mint, to be later re-named St. Peter’s Hospital. This building, set between the river Avon and the ‘close’ of St. Peter’s Church, already had a notable history extending over 200 years and lived on into the twentieth century as one of the most famous and beautiful of Bristol’s half-timbered buildings. The Guardians bought it of Edward Colston, Richard Beecham a London merchant, Sir Thomas Day and Captain Nathaniel Day, and took possession on 7 June 1698.

The principal aim of the founder Guardians in establishing workhouses was to give the children a technical training which would enable them to become independent, and Cary pronounced the experiment a success in this respect. ‘All do something’, he says, ‘though perhaps some of their Labours comes to little, yet it keeps them from Idleness.’\textsuperscript{11} The girls worked at spinning for 10\textsuperscript{\frac{1}{2}} hours a day in summer, 9\textsuperscript{\frac{1}{2}} hours in winter, and were so ‘incouraged’ by new clothes, good food and beds that they settled down cheerfully. The ‘incouragement’ included ‘leave to walks on the Hills with their Tutresses, when their work was over, and the weather fair; by which means we won them into Civility, and a love to their Labour’.\textsuperscript{12}

The business side of the enterprise presented more difficulties. The Corporation employed no contractor, so it was its own sales agent, and it could not induce the weavers to pay more than 8d. a pound for the yarn the girls spun. No doubt the yarn showed unskilled workmanship, but even when the Master priced it according to fineness, the weavers still refused to pay more than 8d., even for the top grade. The Workhouse Committee took the drastic step of resolving to employ at the current wage rate all the city’s poor who applied to them.\textsuperscript{13} Upon this, the manufacturers gave in: they bought all that the children could spin, at prices ranging from 8d. to 2s. a pound, later rising in top grades to 3s. 6d. Receipts mounted to nearly £6 a week from the spinning, as well as £6 from the boys’ weaving. But even at this point the Court Books show that the Committee had to rack its brains to find means to sell both cloth and yarn. Thus, in February 1699/1700 ‘Mr. Henry Lang Informing the Court that he kept the fair with Canteloons made at the Newworkhouse and Could Sell but 13 of them there . . . and that there is remaining in his hands thirty nine pieces which he Could no sell . . .’ was directed to sell all 39

\textsuperscript{11} Cary, \textit{Account}, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, p. 14.
pieces at a slightly reduced price. Stocktaking in the two workhouses in May 1700 showed unsold goods to the value of £56 in the one and £81 in the other, and 'debts due to the Corporation' exceeded £43 and £62 respectively.

Before long it was being urged in opposition to the longer-term objective that the work undertaken ought to be remunerative as quickly as possible and thus relieve the rates. Because unskilled labour in unskilled occupations yields the quickest returns, the Guardians more and more tended to resort to such industries, and especially to pin-making. A Committee in 1743 reported to the Court 'that it would be very Advantageous to this Corporation if the poor of this Hospital were to be employed in Picking Oakum'; 14 this was accordingly started, but as later references show that other manufactures were sometimes pursued simultaneously (e.g. in 1800, woollen manufacture), it is difficult to assess its significance.

However successful the Workhouse intermittently was in technical training, it never managed to produce profits either from skilled or unskilled occupations. Only when a contractor was employed, as in 1750-60, 1789-92 and in 1800, was it possible to avoid a loss on the manufactures. In the early nineteenth century, although unemployment was at least as urgent a problem as in 1696, St. Peter's Hospital was no longer a workhouse, except for those inmates whose work it was to look after the impotent of the 'Family' housed there.

The other able-bodied paupers were put under outside employers, e.g., the Society for Employing the Labouring Poor, who set them to lower Redcliff Hill. Johnson says that the insistence on work deterred 'many hundreds' of Irish labourers from applying for relief. 15 Of various other employments tried, perhaps the most unpopular was stone-breaking at Hotwells. The Guardians disliked it because it entailed journeys to inspect the work two or three times a week, and even then at least 1/- a ton was lost through the theft of stones. Among the men employed it nearly produced a riot in 1832, when instead of paying piece rates for the work, the Corporation made it a relief test; 16 men had to put in 48 hours a week in order to qualify for relief at a fixed

14. Old men had been allocated to this work in October 1699.
15. James Johnson, Address to the Inhabitants of Bristol on the subject of the Poor Rates (1820), p. 24, note.
16. W. Barrett, Deputy-Governor, letter dated 31 May in Bristol Mirror, 2 June 1832. 'He would be a great benefactor to the city who could discover any profitable means of employment for the poor', he writes.
scale of 3s. 4d., plus 3d. a day for each child. A wife had to work at knitting or lace-making to get her allowance of 2s. 1d. a week. These new regulations led to an attack on St. Peter’s Hospital, but none of its inmates joined the protest, and when two ringleaders were arrested the ‘riot’ ended.

This incident aroused a newspaper controversy which brought out the opposing views of a difficult problem: are such payments to be regarded as relief and therefore graded according to need, or are they wages which should be reckoned according to work done? If the former, independent hard work could obviously be less profitable than pauperism. In 1831, nearly £4,000 relief was paid to ‘Working Cases’, and only £205 3s. 2d. was received from their labour.17

Voluntary emigration was tried in 1832 and 1833 as a solution to the employment problem. Of the twelve boys ‘above the Age of 14 Years . . . who may desire to proceed to Canada,’18 and who were to be supplied by the Corporation with clothing and passage and ‘about £3 each’ on their arrival, nothing further is recorded. Next year a party of 70 boys and girls plus 50 adults with their families were equipped to emigrate with their own consent to Van Diemen’s Land. The Guardians were to pay £7 per head of the passage money, and a resident in the colony agreed to provide the remaining £16 on condition that they would all be apprenticed to him for three years. The party duly set out.

Then suddenly, on 30 November, the Bristol Mirror announced that they were all returning from Liverpool because the vessel could not start. The Guardians were left with a bill of £1,309. 15s. 8d., and the would-be emigrants still on the rates.19

Workhouse or Hospital?

From Cary’s Account it is clear that the Mint, while still serving as workhouse for 100 boys, soon become also a ‘hospital’ by the addition of infants, aged, infirm and lunatic patients.20 Johnson saw a minute book of the period before 1700 which showed that twelve out of 36 ‘impotent’ admitted in three months were over 70 years old. The proportion of impotent increased: by 1820, 128 of the 436 inmates were classified as past work, 97 sick or

17. Bristol Mirror, 16 June 1832, reporting statement made by the Governor at a General Court of the Corporation, 14 June 1832.
insane and 81 as children.\textsuperscript{21} In 1825 there were 461 persons in the ‘Family’, of whom 319 were impotent.\textsuperscript{22}

Such additions emphasise the need for medical care. The pioneer of the medical department was Dr. Thomas Dover, famous as the originator of a powder which remained a popular remedy down to the nineteenth century. In 1697 he ‘offered himself to be Phisitian to the New Workhouse gratis’,\textsuperscript{23} and his example was followed by other ‘chyrurgeons’ and ‘Phisitians’. At its peak the medical staff numbered two or three of each, besides an Apothecary. It is difficult to ascertain whether the doctors received any regular pay. For the barber-surgeons who volunteered their services in 1699, the Corporation ordered ‘£10 per annum paid them for . . . looking over the people that want their assistance, and likewise for medicines that shall be used in chirurgery and also for shaving the men, and cutting the boys’ hair’. There are two later grants of a regular salary—in 1703 and 1735; yet it was emphatically refused in 1780 and 1781; and when Johnson recorded the ‘entire expense of the medical department’ for the years 1820-23 it included no fees and only one salary.\textsuperscript{24} Usually vacancies were advertised, however, and in 1819 one successful applicant published in the \textit{Bristol Mirror} his thanks to the Guardians whose votes had secured his election.

The only salary mentioned in 1826 was that of the Apothecary. As a full-time official he was the pivot of the department. When the first Apothecary was appointed in 1717 his salary was fixed at £60 a year. It rose to £100 in 1743, but as he had to find all his own drugs this was still inadequate. When the Corporation decided to stock its own dispensary in the House, putting the Apothecary in charge of it, his salary reverted to £60 a year. Still more important was the change in 1811, when the post was made resident.

Once a resident institution had been established, whether as workhouse or ‘hospital’, its success depended largely on the Master and Matron or Mistress. The first Mistress of the New Workhouse with its 100 girls must nearly have wrecked the experiment, for in December 1698 a committee of Guardians appointed to enquire into ‘very great disorders’ in that house reported that they ‘do arise chiefly from the heights and fury of the spirits of the Mistress and Tutresses in their carriage one to another’.

\textsuperscript{21} Johnson, \textit{Address}, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{22} T. Menlove, in \textit{Felix Farley’s Bristol Journal}, 2 July 1825.
\textsuperscript{23} Court Books, 9 December 1697.
\textsuperscript{24} Johnson, \textit{Transactions}, p. 107.
Mrs. Cooke, the Mistress, was thereupon dismissed. A very different woman evidently was Mary Atlay, matron from 1800. When she became too old and infirm for her arduous work, the Guardians resolved to appoint a Sub-matron to help her. But their nominee respectfully declined to take this salaried post: she explained that she had already been helping Mrs. Atlay 'because of her kindness to me when I was unfortunately bereaved', and she continued to do so without pay until Mrs. Atlay's death in 1823.

In 1709 the girls were transferred from the New Workhouse lent by the City Council, to St. Peter's Hospital.25 Thenceforth the Mistress gradually became subordinate in status to the Master and her responsibilities more domestic. Salary scales reflect this: whereas her original £10 a year with residence had only risen to £30 by 1834, the Master's salary rose in the later half of the period by leaps and bounds, until in 1834 he was getting £250 a year. This was no doubt due partly to the great increase in his duties, shown in the rules which the Corporation laid down in much detail in 1817. To the Matron was assigned the care of the house and its inmates and the supervision of foster-mothers 'in the adjacent country villages'. The Master was also responsible for paying outdoor relief 'at the window of the Counting House on Relief Days'; for arranging to transport paupers returned to their parishes of settlement; for reporting any neglect of duty by his staff—even the Chaplain—and for keeping up to date 14 specified account and record books. Small wonder that he was to be 'of an unexceptionable character humane and active disposition firm conduct good manners and well versed in accounts'; perhaps small wonder, too, that he was nevertheless required to find security for £500.

Although the Master and Matron were primarily responsible for order and discipline in 'the Family', the Guardian had from the first laid down meticulous rules for this and limited their power of punishment. Cary is enthusiastic about the disciplinary effect of the first experiment: 'Among three hundred Persons', he says, 'there is neither Cursing nor Swearing, nor prophane Language, to be heard, though many of them were bred up in all manner of Vices'.26 Perhaps a grain of salt should be added to this; certainly the Court Books do not bear out his assertion that the stocks and whipping-post in the house never had to be used. The Court ordered a whipping in fifteen cases in the first 3½

25. See supra., p. 4.
years, chiefly for running away or petty theft. Only the Court of Guardians could impose this sentence, or confine delinquents in the 'pens' or 'Purgatory'; the Master had to report any offence to the Committee of Correction.

Education was a luxury provided for the children only inter-
mittently and sparingly. The intention at first was that boys and girls should be taught to read; all those 'who can speak and go', said Cary, 'are carried down into the School to learn their A, B, C, etc.'; but the renewal of orders for teaching suggests that it lapsed altogether at times. One such order of the Court in 1718, while it shows an extended curriculum, reveals also the standard of the teacher, who as Clerk would have to make the entry himself. 'Ordered by this Court that John Jayne the present Clark to this Corporacion be paid eight pounds per annum more than what he had allowed before thistime for which the boys of this house that learnes writing and arithmetick shall be taught three halfe days more every week.'

Not until 1767 was a Chaplain appointed, perhaps because the Hospital was adjacent to St. Peter's Church. Master and Matron accompanied 'the Family' to the services there on Sun-
days, and prayers were read in the House, sometimes by an inmate appointed by the Court. The rules of 1817 allow nonconformists to go to their own place of worship, provided they bring to the Master a certificate of their regular attendance signed by their minister. This concession may owe something to the fact noted by Johnson, that the electors often voted for nonconformists as Guardians—they were more than half the number in 1826—because they had not to serve parish office as well.

Food must always have been a matter of major interest to the children and to most of the other inmates of the Hospital. Here, too, a good start was made: Cary says that the doctor was con-
sulted about provisions, and these included 'Beef, Pease, Potatoes, Broath, Pease-porridge, Milk-porridge, Bread and Cheese, . . . Cabage, Carrots, Turnips, etc.' To the end of the period, advertisements for provision contracts always stipulated for good quality. Menus given in detail by writers from 1795 to 1825 are more monotonous and less scientifically planned than those laid

down earlier for the Quaker workhouse. Moreover the beer must have deteriorated since Cary reported that it was 'such as we drank at our own Tables'; Menlove, Deputy-Governor, says in 1825 that 'it will hardly stand glancing at.' Yet from first to last the writers agree that the workhouse diet was far better than the average labourer's family could afford. For dinner there was either soup or meat and potatoes, or bread and cheese. In 1795 the rations per head were: 1 lb. of meat and 1 lb. of bread on meat days; 3 oz. of cheese per cheese meal. In 1820 this was reduced to 9 oz. of meat and 14 oz. of bread, with 10 oz. of potatoes on soup days and 8 oz. on meat days. Nurses had meat every day, and vegetables other than potatoes were not rationed for anyone.

The only criticisms of the catering during the Corporation's independence are charges of waste and extravagance. In 1784, when there had been a rapid increase in the rates, a Visiting Guardian discovered that one of his colleagues had signed the Visitors' report recording 476 inmates when only 405 were there. He therefore undertook to call over and check the number every week. This reform, combined with a work test which the new Deputy-Governor Isaac Cooke instituted for the able-bodied, brought the population of the Hospital down to 325 in 1785, and the food bill from £3,464. 17s. 10½d. to £1,587. 10s. 3d. So much more had been supplied than was needed that the inmates sold back bread to the Matron at 1d. a loaf—a second-hand trade which in 20 months amounted to 65,342 pound loaves, besides cheese, and which in 1783 had cost the Hospital nearly £1,000 besides the first purchase of the food. When the coal contractor found that his coal was to be weighed on delivery, he demanded an extra penny a sack. There had been excessive buying of clothing, too: the bill for this item went down from £579. 5s. 5d. in 1783 to £51. 12s. 1¾d. in 1785, and at the end of the year 1785-6 there were still 780 yards of material of various kinds in store, besides many other articles.

This episode illustrates the importance of thorough, frequent and regular inspection by the Guardians. At the outset the Court had realised this and appointed from its members a separate Visi-

33. Isaac Cooke, Address to the principal inhabitants of the city of Bristol, on the enormous increase of the poor tax in the said city (Bristol 1786), p. 6, inset, n.
ing Committee for each workhouse. The greater ease of supervision in the Mint, where the Court met on the premises, was given as a reason in 1699 in favour of the transfer of the girls thither. From 1719 to 1743, daily inspection was ordered by the Court, and even when this was ultimately reduced to two visits a week (1812), detailed instructions were given to the Visiting Guardians emphasising the importance of thorough inspection as a safeguard against oppression as well as other abuses. In the Court Books many suggestions for repairs or alterations to buildings or for reorganisation of some department, charges of neglect on the part of the staff, orders for supervision or changes in manufacture, emanate from these Visitors. The persistent slackness which must have led to the economy campaign of 1784-6 is apparently the exception which emphasises the importance of the rule.  

The blackest and most indelible blot on the scutcheon of the Corporation is undoubtedly the overcrowding of St. Peter’s Hospital. This could scarcely have been foreseen when the premises were bought in 1698 as a workhouse for 100 boys. The *Bristol Mirror* estimated in 1832 that the house could take 300 people comfortably. But its speedy transformation into a hospital, together with the transfer of the girls’ workhouse to the same building, made classification at once urgent and impossible. Numbers increased rapidly, and occasional references in the Court Books suggest that repairs and additions were put off until the eleventh hour or later. In December 1767 new arrangements for manufacture were made, and one side effect recorded was the conversion of existing work-rooms ‘to the very much wanted purpose of Bed Rooms for the Children, who now sleep Six and Eight in a Bed in a very confined appartment’. When Eden visited the house (circa 1795) he found it dirty and overcrowded, with 350 inmates. Johnson’s figures of its population for the year 1812-19 range from a minimum of 376 (1814) to a maximum of 436 (1819). Annual records published in local newspapers from 1820 show thes totals amounting to 600 in 1832.

Twice the Guardians made an effort to cope with this terrible state of affairs, but each time they were frustrated by events beyond their control. A clause in the Bristol Poor Bill of 1822

36. *Bristol Mirror*, 11 August 1832.
37. *In 1709. See supra*, p. 9.
proposed building a new workhouse; but the ratepayers, having just had to build a new gaol, flatly refused to put up another costly ‘Receptacle’. The clause had to be struck out to save the Bill. In 1830 the Corporation did get statutory authority to buy the Armoury at Stapleton for use as a Lunatic Asylum—one step towards the classification that was impossible in St. Peter’s Hospital. But before the place was ready there came the Reform riots, and Bristol was faced with the task of raising £10,000 a year to repair the devastation.

The tragedy of 1832 was therefore not entirely the Corporation’s fault. The horror which swept through the city with the cholera reached its climax at St. Peter’s Hospital. According to statistics, the Hospital’s record had compared far more unfavourably with that of the city in a typhus epidemic of 1817-18, when the Dispensary had a death rate of 1 in 50 patients, whereas at St. Peter’s, under similar treatment, 1 in 4 cases died. Probably it was the swift violence of the cholera which made it more alarming; the death rate in the Workhouse (71 out of 168 cases) was similar in proportion to the number of cases to that in the city, where 105 out of 261 victims died. But of the 105 cases reported between 11 July and 10 August, 71 were in St. Peter’s Hospital. Ten days later it was reported clear of cholera, which had not yet quite reached its height in the city; but one reason for this improvement was that so many had died already.

The newspapers said all they could for the Guardians, emphasising the high proportion of sick, aged and children in the house, and the ‘great kindness and attention to cleanliness and ventilation, as far as in such a building is practicable’. But no apologist could deny the disastrous effect of overcrowding: the girls’ ward had 10 beds and 58 inmates, 8 of them in one bed; the boys’ ward had been 70 and 80 boys in 16 beds.

Emergency measures were taken at once by the removal of 100 inmates during the week of 10-17 August, perhaps to the still unfurnished Armoury. The changes in Poor Law organisation already in the air probably delayed any permanent arrangement, but after the Act of 1834 the first proposal submitted by the Bristol Guardians to the Assistant Commissioner for his sanction was for the purchase of the Admiralty prison at Stapleton in order

41. Bristol Mirror, 11 and 18 August 1832.
42. Ibid., 18 August 1832.
to turn it into an additional workhouse. It was not long before St. Peter’s Hospital could be described by the Assistant Commissioner as ‘one of the most cleanly and well-ventilated establishments in England’ (1835).

**Apprenticeship**

‘Charity to children’, says Dr. Marshall writing of 18th-century England, ‘meant enabling them to earn their living at the earliest possible moment’. This aim was clearly in the minds of Bristol’s pioneer Guardians, so they not only established workhouses to train poor children but appointed in 1697 a committee ‘to consider of methods to put out the Boys Apprentices that are chargeable to this Corporation’. They had power to bind such children if between 7 and 16 years old, the apprenticeship to last for a ‘manchild’ to the age of 24, for a girl until her marriage or the age of 21. But the committee’s first stipulation was that the master must be ‘a man of ability and honesty also of some sort of employment or faculty lest otherwise the Child be ill treated . . . or else consume his time idly without learning anything whereby he may live thereafter’. They proposed asking the Mayor and Aldermen to ‘encourage’ by their own example suitable masters to take poor children as apprentices, and urged ‘the members of this Society’ to set the example. The result was not recorded in the Court Books, but the few masters mentioned during the first ten years included a naval captain and three craftsmen. When an Act of 1704 empowered churchwardens and overseers to compel shipowners to take pauper boys over 10 years old as apprentices, 28 were so bound by the Bristol Corporation on one day (18 October 1704). But the shipowners preferred country lads; the Act slipped into disuse, and when it was revived in 1818, most of them paid a £10 fine rather than take the town boys. The Guardians objected strongly, because while the owners paid no rates on their ships they were thus enabling outsiders to qualify for relief. The end of the struggle is not recorded.

Johnson remarks that the Guardians would not apprentice any of their children to chimney-sweeps ‘from the most humane motives’, although the law allowed it; and applications from

manufacturers for batches of pauper children seem to have been submitted to careful examination before acceptance. 49

There are signs that the Corporation recognised some responsibility for the behaviour and the treatment of its child apprentices. A complaint of several of these girls absconding and 'Idleing about the Streets' was brought to it in 1705; the culprits were caught and sent before the Mayor and Aldermen by order of the Guardians. 50 Later, under Isaac Cooke's régime, a master and his wife were sentenced by the Quarter Sessions to £8 fine and six months' imprisonment for ill treatment of a girl apprentice. Thereupon the Corporation had a notice of the sentence published 'in all Public Papers . . . warning all others who have taken apprentices out of this house to take all proper Care of them as the House is determined to prosecute all Persons who ill use . . . them.' 51

The Industrial Revolution and its effects increased both the importance and the practical difficulty of after-care, and in 1816 the Deputy Governor William Stock visited all the factories where the Corporation had recently placed apprentices. 52 No record of his report is extant, but Johnson says he was allowed to question the children by themselves and that he found no case of actual ill-treatment, although conditions were 'not in every respect agreeable to the wishes of the Guardians.' 53

Out-relief

Surviving records have so far shown few glimpses of the Corporation’s administration of out-relief until the early 19th century, although the number of out-poor then averaged annually more than ten times those in the Hospital. In 1697 a permanent committee had been appointed to deal with applications, and each Pay Guardian might grant a very limited sum on his own authority as emergency relief. Although the emphasis on self-help was perhaps rather less prominent than in the contemporary Quaker foundation, 54 the committee was directed to compel relatives to contribute towards maintenance where possible, however small the amount. Absconding fathers, actual and putative, were as elusive a plague in Bristol as elsewhere: Johnson's figures (1812-19) show

51. Ibid., 10 August 1786. p. 122.
52. Johnson gives date 1818.
a steady annual rise, except for 1815, and even in that year the Guardians had to relieve 154 illegitimate children, for only 15 of whom was any payment received.\textsuperscript{55} 1825 was apparently a peak year, when printed accounts show that £1,289. 1s. 2d. was received from maintenance orders. This may indicate, not growing immorality, but more efficient enforcement of orders.

It was not always easy to avoid overlapping with Bristol's numerous endowed charities, or to decide where the legal boundary lay between their administration and the Corporation's, especially while a clause in the Tiverton Act ordered all charitable gifts since May 1698 to be handed over to the new body. This was repealed in 1714, and on the whole the Corporation made use of existing charities where these were relevant.

To prevent fraud was also a problem. The Guardians tried various solutions, mostly short-lived. Isaac Cooke, Menlove and Johnson all agreed that for the able-bodied the work test was the most useful: in 1784-6 it had produced a wholesale reduction in both indoor and outdoor relief, though most of these outdoor cases were casuals. Cooke (1785) says that the inmates 'when work is mentioned to them, . . . would rather go out and steal'.\textsuperscript{56}

A work test was revived in 1825 for all who applied for relief on the ground of unemployment. Bye-laws then 'discouraged' out-relief for men striking for higher wages and for deserted wives who refused information by which their runaway husbands might be caught.

None of the social problems with which it had to cope cost the Corporation more time and trouble than the Settlement Laws. It is hard to say whether they were a worse bane to the pauper or to the Guardians. Every Poor Law Authority of the period did its utmost to keep down the number of 'intruders' who by acquiring settlement within its area might become chargeable to the rates. Men could qualify as 'settled' by serving annual office in the city, or by apprenticeship,\textsuperscript{57} or by paying rates for a house of not less than £10 value. It was possible to gain fraudulent settlement under this last clause by collusion with the landlord. A Bill brought before Parliament in 1774 'to prevent unnecessary and vexatious removals of the Poor' produced a letter from Mr. Hobhouse of Clifton to the Court of Guardians, very outspoken both as to the difficulties and risks in the Bill and as to the 'Evils and

\textsuperscript{55} Johnson, \textit{Address}, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{56} Cooke, \textit{Address}, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{57} Cf. \textit{supra}, p. 14.
Hardships of the present System'. He had experience of the ‘dirty Shifts of parochial Cunning in the Execution’ of the existing regulations. Litigation, even when straightforward, was slow. An appeal against a removal order was almost a matter of course, an adjournment of the appeal apparently equally so. Thus the lawyers were the gainers, the unsettled paupers the worst losers.

Returned settlers were unlikely to be welcome in their own parish, but if they left it again they became legally rogues and vagabonds and had little alternative but to act up to this character. Plenty of evidence testifies to the energy and ingenuity of both sides in the continuous duel waged between authority and such chronic vagrants. A special order of the Corporation of the Poor (1700-1) urged the Guardians to ‘Apprehend all Beggars and Vagrants that Shall be found in this city during the fair,’ an occasion when professional beggars swarmed. In those early days the Court of Guardians sentenced convicted vagrants to three years in Bridewell ‘unless the Court shall otherwise determine’—as it apparently often did after a few days. But the problem grew out of hand a century later. The contractor for the removal of vagrants from Middlesex told a House of Commons committee that in 1808-20 he had removed over 6,500 persons to Bristol alone. A Relief Book showed that the Guardians there sometimes feebly took the line of least resistance and paid applicants to keep away for a specified time.

The very nature of vagrancy made investigation impossible. It was obviously to the interest of chronic tramps to claim the most distant settlement possible. The Cumberland justices in 1829 publicly accused Bristol and Gloucester of deliberately and repeatedly passing to Scotland vagrants who had no legal settlement there. A Glasgow sailor who had been stranded in Bristol alleged that six of the twenty with whom he was ‘passed’ north were assuredly not Scots, although they had sworn that they were. He found that pass-masters who knew the old regulars gave or lent them money to slip away and go back. Bristol Guardians in reply admitted that they had long suspected some such fraud, but it was difficult to prove because of the strong national resemblance of Scots and the fact that so many bear the same names. The Corporation had therefore sought the help of ‘our friend Mr.

59. Ibid. 23 January 1700/1, p. 77.
60. Ibid. 22/26 January 1697/8. pp. 54-6.
McAdam, the celebrated roadmaker, and as a result all applicants who claimed Scottish nationality were sent to be tested by the agent of the Caledonian Society in Bristol before being 'passed' back.

Bristol's proximity to Ireland brought a concentration of Irish vagrants. Most of these were labourers who came over in summer for farm work, and it was alleged that many left their wages to be sent home after them, in order to get passed back to Ireland as destitute. The Guardians could get no assistance in shouldering this responsibility. An Act of 1744 ordered ships' masters to take on each voyage to Ireland one vagrant for every 20 tons burthen, a quota increased next year to one for every 7 tons in the case of Bristol; but this proved inadequate. In the 12 months of 1819, ships trading from the port were legally liable to take 450 such passengers, whereas the number of Irish vagrants passed to Bristol was 621 in three months. The Guardians were debarred by a judicial decision from setting these men to work, even pending their removal. An Act allowing magistrates to grant vagrants passes without preliminary imprisonment resulted in the expense of their maintenance as far as Ireland rising from £310. 8s. 5d. in 1818 to £1,539. 15s. 5d. in 1822. In the following year this Irish item was over four times as great as that of all other 'Journeys and Removals', although no escort travelled with the Irish.

Finance

Finance was as persistent a problem to the Corporation of the Poor as to their successors, and it was even more intractable when the only help to be expected from Westminster was legislation. The Act of 1696 had authorised the levy of a fixed sum by a local rate. Calculating on the basis of recent expenditure in poor relief, the maximum was laid down as £2,376. 16s. 5d. This total was raised to £3,500 in 1714 and to £4,500 in 1745; but not until 1758 did Parliament realise that the lengthy and expensive process of procuring a new private Act for each such extension added unnecessarily to the burden laid on the Corporation in hard times. By the Act of 1758 adjustable financial machinery at last replaced rigidity.

63. Bristol Mirror, 28 November, 5 December 1829. Letters between Cumberland and Bristol are dated July-September.
64. Johnson, Address, p. 51.
The Corporation had based its recurrent applications to Parliament for rate increase on special contemporary difficulties: the enlargement of the city (1712), the decay of manufactures (1713), the calamities of war (1713 and 1758). To petition Parliament for new legislation was a last resort: repeatedly, financial crises were met by loans or gifts from the City Council or private citizens. Loans from the Council, secured by mortgages, amounted to £1,850 by 1712, and the Council sometimes had to order legal proceedings to be instituted to get repayment. Loans from individual Guardians between 1696 and 1784 totalled £3,826, not counting the unspecified amounts advanced by the Pay Guardians in 1697 in lieu of a rate or the sums frequently advanced by the Treasurer. The latter was a special case, for as rates were not due from collectors until six months after the assessment, the Treasurer had always to make considerable loans for current expenses: in 1823 these advances amounted to £10,411. 8s. An attempt at reform was made in the Bristol Poor Act of 1822 by substituting a quarterly rate and paying collectors a commission of 4½d. on £1. But the reform started clogged with arrears amounting to £16,826. 4s. accumulated since 1817; and another £13,000 fell due in March 1823, before the new machinery had got into its swing. Moreover, the published accounts for eleven consecutive years show that the collectors succeeded only three times in getting in more than 50 per cent of the rate during the year; sometimes their harvest fell below 40 per cent. The Corporation’s income from arrears was nearly always greater than that from the current year’s rate. Unfair assessments were partly to blame: apparently no attempt at revision was made for over a century. Yet when the Corporation proposed in 1822 to have assessments made every seven years, the ratepayers strongly objected to the expense.

The bane of the rate-collector was the tenement of under £10 rent. Its prosperous landlord was not legally liable for the rates; its occupier had not the money. There were 918 such tenements in St. James’s parish and 557 in St. Augustine’s. Other parishes had fewer, but in St. Philip and St. Jacob their annual value was £1,622, and in each of five other parishes it was over £1,000. The Guardians’ proposal to make the landlords liable for the rates of such houses was fiercely opposed, but the Act of 1822 restricted the old arrangement to quarterly tenancies.

66. An advertisement in 1822 offered for sale 50 such houses on Redcliff Hill “always tenanted”, and promised an immediate return of “nearly 13 per cent”.
Guardians

No factor was more essential to the success of any system of poor relief than securing the right type of administrator. The eighteenth-century Guardian worked unsupervised and almost unchecked by any central authority; in Bristol the Court of Guardians was by statute practically exempt from magisterial interference, and had itself several magisterial powers.

The complaint against Guardians of this period in most districts is twofold: that annual change of officers makes impossible both continuity of policy and the necessary acquaintance with applicants; and that men with experience and leisure for public work refuse such an exacting office, leaving it to overseers "not one in twenty of whom is adequate to the performance". The incorporating Act of 1696 partly safeguarded Bristol from the first of these evils, for it laid down a term of four years' service, half the number of Guardians being elected every two years. In 1745 the over-lapping was applied to those ranking as Assistants: each year six were newly chosen by their colleagues to serve with six from the previous year. Moreover, many served more than the legal minimum. By an Act of 1718 a man was entitled to exemption if he had already served as Guardian within the six preceding years, but this right was rarely claimed; instances of eight, nine and ten years' service are as frequent after 1718 as before.

Long tenure was especially notable in the three chief offices of the Corporation, which were often reached after one or more terms in the ranks, during which a man would presumably learn to know his work and his selectors (colleagues) to know him. Johnson was a Guardian for nine years before serving three years as Governor; at least two other Governors held the office for five years at a stretch. There were obvious special reasons for making the Treasurer's office permanent in 1822, but before that was enacted, one man had held the post for eight consecutive years, his predecessor for thirteen, and two Vaughans for a total of seventeen years.

Most hard-worked of all the members of the Corporation was the Deputy-Governor, yet one man held this post nine times, and others for four and five years. It was apparently about the middle of the eighteenth century that the Deputy-Governor became practically head of the executive, for in 1766 Joseph Flower was voted a grant of £75 for taking the office a second year. When Henry

The Old Court Room, St. Peter's Hospital. Headquarters of the Corporation of the Poor.
**APPENDIX A.**

A Table shewing the sums of money received by the Corporation of the Poor, in Bristol, each year, from 1800 to 1822, arranged under their respective heads. In the first column, the date of the year is set down; in the second, the balance in the Treasurer's hands left over from the former year; the third, shews the yearly assessment made on the public for maintaining the Poor; the fourth, balance of maintaining sundry persons; the fifth, rents of the several estates belonging to the Corporation; and the last column shews the yearly earnings of the Poor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Balance in Treasurer's hands</th>
<th>Yearly Assessments</th>
<th>Maintenance of sundry persons</th>
<th>The rent of Estates</th>
<th>Earnings of the Poor</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1800</td>
<td>£5322 14 3</td>
<td>£13812 12 0</td>
<td>£154 8 10</td>
<td>£255 11 0</td>
<td>£30 13 0</td>
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<td>1801</td>
<td>£6778 8 4</td>
<td>£12350 0 0</td>
<td>£252 9 4</td>
<td>£220 1 0</td>
<td>£9 2 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1802</td>
<td>£7065 10 10</td>
<td>£11700 0 0</td>
<td>£250 11 2</td>
<td>£263 7 6</td>
<td>£40 13 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1803</td>
<td>£6426 13 9</td>
<td>£11350 0 0</td>
<td>£174 14 0</td>
<td>£144 0 0</td>
<td>£55 12 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1804</td>
<td>£7354 8 6</td>
<td>£11250 0 0</td>
<td>£192 11 0</td>
<td>£288 11 6</td>
<td>£36 8 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1805</td>
<td>£6337 19 11</td>
<td>£11500 0 0</td>
<td>£373 18 0</td>
<td>£184 3 0</td>
<td>£94 4 0</td>
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<td>£10500 0 0</td>
<td>£460 12 2</td>
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<td>£584 7 6</td>
<td>£243 11 9</td>
<td>£5 7 2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>£12000 0 0</td>
<td>£756 19 10</td>
<td>£438 6 6</td>
<td>£62 2 2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>£14000 0 0</td>
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<td>£257 15 6</td>
<td>£42 1 9</td>
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<td>£14500 0 0</td>
<td>£443 18 9</td>
<td>£270 18 6</td>
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<td>£494 5 2</td>
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<td>£24 17 0</td>
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<td>£815 1 11</td>
<td>£16000 0 0</td>
<td>£596 5 10</td>
<td>£280 14 6</td>
<td>£16 4 10</td>
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<td>1814</td>
<td>From the year 1813 to 1819</td>
<td>£16000 0 0</td>
<td>£426 7 7</td>
<td>£367 9 5</td>
<td>£14 4 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>1815</td>
<td></td>
<td>£15500 0 0</td>
<td>£455 14 1</td>
<td>£347 6 6</td>
<td>£39 17 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1816</td>
<td></td>
<td>£15500 0 0</td>
<td>£798 13 2</td>
<td>£313 14 6</td>
<td>£2 9 8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1817</td>
<td></td>
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<td>£965 16 8</td>
<td>£327 11 6</td>
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<td></td>
<td>£27500 0 0</td>
<td>£775 9 11</td>
<td>£326 0 6</td>
<td>£8 8 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1819</td>
<td></td>
<td>£27500 0 0</td>
<td>£970 19 4</td>
<td>£365 18 8</td>
<td>£15 4 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td></td>
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<td>£1028 0 10</td>
<td>£373 2 0</td>
<td>£30 16 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1821</td>
<td></td>
<td>£23000 0 0</td>
<td>£1240 0 2</td>
<td>£373 2 0</td>
<td>£46 13 2</td>
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<td>£898 19 8</td>
<td>£289 3 0</td>
<td>£134 0 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Burgum retired from it in 1768 he wrote in a committee book:—

"Henry Burgum
for the last time

And if you ever catch me at it again
I'll gee you my mother for an old man" 68

Perhaps the Municipal Report of 1835 explains his outburst: it recorded that in one year the Deputy-Governor had given 500 attendances, some of six or eight hours. This may explain the more frequent changes in the office: there were 114 Deputy-Governors before 1834, as against 82 Governors and 77 Treasurers.

The Corporation or its electors certainly succeeded in securing a far better type of administrator than the 'inadequate' parish overseers 69 although fluctuations were naturally inevitable, and the statutory power of fining Guardians for non-attendance at Courts and committee meetings had to be invoked fairly frequently. A petition to Parliament in 1755 suggests that they took seriously the prestige and responsibility which election gave them as 'the representative body of the inhabitants of Bristol'. Mayors, Sheriffs, Masters of the Society of Merchant Venturers, were often elected as Guardians, at least six Guardians had been or were to be members of Parliament for the city. 70 Beaven remarks that of the Governors in the years 1696-1745, 1766-75 and 1784-91 only nine had not already passed the mayoral chair. 71 The Court's registers show many names which are a part of Bristol's commercial and civic history: several Eltons, early generations of Frys, Fishers, various Gibbets, Christopher Thomas the soap manufacturer, the original W. D. and H. O. Wills, Henry and John Hobhouse, Tyndall of Tyndall's Park.

That there were occasional periods of slackness, leading to something like corruption, is evident from the reforms instituted by Isaac Cooke in 1784-6. 72 One instance of flagrant dishonesty, dated 1733, was recorded on a board above the Court Room door until its destruction by the bombs of 1940. "Richard Baggs, an unworthy Member of this Corporation, having defrauded the Poor and being detected of the same, paid the sum of £200 for

68. cit. Johnson, Transactions, p. 72.
69. Cf. M. Tomkins, The 2 Workhouses, pp. 17-18 and 23. Six of the Guardians elected in 1696 were Quakers, some of whom took an active part in both enterprises.
71. A. B. Beaven, Bristol Lists (1899), p. 120.
72. Supra, p. 11.
the benefit of the said Poor'. This inscription was ordered by the Court of Guardians in 1733. Nearly a century later one Guardian, Zachariah Cartwright, wrote to the *Bristol Journal* accusing the Corporation of feasting at the expense of the poor, alleging that they used their receipts from fines for part of the expense of the annual dinner to the tenants of their Shirehampton estate, whereas the Act of 1696 had ordered that such fines should be for the use of the poor.\(^{73}\) It would be difficult to ascertain now what grounds Cartwright had for his protest, and there is no evidence that it had any effect.

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, while it put an end to the independent existence of the Corporation of the Poor, embodied in a national system some of its more successful experiments, e.g., locally elected Guardians. The amalgamation of parishes in the larger city unit had long been clearly necessary to cope with the problem of poverty, and many towns had adopted it since Bristol had proved its practical advantages. But the average citizen was still chiefly interested in the question of poor relief when it touched his pocket: it was the ratepayers whose opposition to the expense of adequate accommodation for the poor had been chiefly responsible for the terrible mortality when an epidemic swept through the overcrowded workhouse. Even after this shock, and even after the reform of 1834, the tendency remained for ratepayer and recipient to look at poor relief from very different points of view.

The Corporation had justified its creation, particularly in raising the status of Poor Law administration, enlisting it in some notable citizens who brought to its service a zeal 'much at variance with their personal pursuits and interests.'\(^{74}\) This was a permanent gain. As regards the special problem which the pioneers had in mind in 1696, viz., the employment of the 'idle' poor, the Corporation soon discovered how much more complicated a matter this was than it appeared. Their successors repeatedly made the same discovery. None succeeded in finding a lasting solution.

The existence of the Corporation of the Poor was not terminated by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. It already fulfilled the conditions of administrative union and elected Guardians which that Act required. The Municipal Corporation Act (1835) left the original boundary of the 1696 union intact: the extensions of the city were included in two new Unions, Barton Regis and

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73. *Bristol Journal*, 3 August 1822.
74. 'X.Y.Z.', in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 17 February 1821.
Bedminster. But difficulties arose over the audit of accounts by the central authority, after it was given by an amending statute the power to combine districts for audit. The Corporation came under increasing pressure from the Poor Law Board and its successor the Local Government Board to adopt the district scale of relief, which was inconveniently lower than that used in Bristol. From 1844 to 1856 the Corporation maintained its right to fix its own scale. Finally the Guardians were threatened with legal proceedings for the recovery of £23,157 'surcharge' which could be claimed from them individually.\footnote{75} They surrendered. In 1857 the Corporation accepted the 'general authority' of the Board, altering its bye-laws accordingly.\footnote{76}

At length, on 31 March 1898 the Corporation of the Poor was dissolved. Its area was combined with parts of the Bedminster and Barton Regis Unions to form an administrative unit coextensive with the municipality. All local Acts concerning Poor Law matters in Bristol were repealed: it fell into the national line. The property of the old Corporation was transferred to the new Board; so were its 'family', indoor, outdoor and boarded-out.\footnote{77} Of the 63 Guardians elected to form this new Board, 52 were previous Guardians;\footnote{78} the Clerk appointed in 1887 and the firm of legal advisers appointed in 1760 continued to serve. Continuity of personnel smoothed the transition to the new régime.

\footnote{75}{Auditors were empowered to make a surcharge for improper expenditure.}
\footnote{76}{Nomenclature in the period following (1857-98) is confusing. The elected Governor and Deputy-Governor of the Corporation are also referred to as Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Bristol Board of Guardians. It is possible that a distinction had come to exist only in law.}
\footnote{77}{\textit{Bristol Times and Mirror}, 31 March 1898. The number of poor in the Corporation's charge at the amalgamation is given as 2,820. Barton Regis had then 5480.}
\footnote{78}{\textit{Bristol Times and Mirror}, 2 April 1898.}

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